

## **BETA THETA PI**

### ***JOHN HOLT DUNCAN***

Founder John Holt Duncan was the first president of Beta Theta Pi, having been selected for the position prior to the Founding on August 8, 1839. Perhaps you have been to the Administrative Office and seen John Holt Duncan's wooden leg in the Beta Museum. I wonder if you know how he got that wooden leg or what happened after he got it.

For about 10 years after graduation from Miami University, John Holt Duncan practiced law in his home state of Mississippi. He then moved to Bexar County, Texas and became a judge. But in that terrible war that divided the United States, he also was called to service in the Confederate Cavalry and became a Captain in Company C of Col. Haupt's Regiment of the Texas Cavalry. He fought with General Price in one of the most bitter campaigns, the campaign in Missouri and Arkansas where you never were sure who was a soldier and who was a guerrilla.

Price's forces made a raid in the northern-held territory and engaged the Union Army on September 30, 1862 at Newtonia in extreme southwestern Missouri south of Joplin. During that engagement when his Company was facing Union forces with superior numbers, John Holt Duncan was wounded in the leg while "gallantly charging the enemy." To save him, the Confederate surgeons had to amputate his right leg. But they could not take him with them because of the pursuit of the Union forces.

So they left him at a farmhouse where a member of the Confederate army lived. There he was cared for by the farmer's wife and his family. It was well known that the penalty for harboring Confederates was death. As fate would have it, the farmer came home on leave soon after Duncan was left there. A few days later along came the Union Cavalry and found John Holt Duncan, the farmer who had cared for him, and the farmer's wife and his children. They took Founder Duncan and the farmer and stood them up against the barn. They killed the farmer in full view of his family and in full view of John Holt Duncan. They would have killed John Holt Duncan too if it had not been for the intercession of the farmer's weeping widow and children.

After recovering Duncan returned to Bexar County and served as a judge for a year. He then relocated to Houston and practiced law while also serving as city attorney, county clerk, and city recorder for a number of years. Though these positions provided him with an adequate income, he lived very frugally, almost as if he were destitute.

He never married even though deeply enamored with a lovely woman. Though their relationship spanned the years, they denied themselves the pleasure of marriage and children. Even his friends were puzzled by his strange behavior and some regarded him as an eccentric miser.

On May 27, 1896, John Holt Duncan died in an old soldier's home in Austin, Texas, virtually penniless. Do you know why he was penniless? Because from the day that he was wounded and saw the devotion of that farmer, he deemed it his solemn duty to support and educate the children of the man murdered for his sake. So from the day he was wounded until he went into the old soldier's home, he spent virtually every cent he made caring for and supporting the farmer's widow and family. You see, John Holt Duncan had character — Beta character. Character sparkles like the diamond of our badge.